

Caring for Venison in Warm Weather



Keep Your Harvest Fresh and Wholesome

Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade & Consumer Protection



Every deer hunter craves the ultimate reward—venison on the table. But to reduce the risk of food-borne illness, hunters need to handle, process and prepare deer properly, being careful to prevent contamination from the field to the table. To fully enjoy your sport and treat family and friends to safe venison, follow these easy food safety recommendations.

Essential Equipment

- A sharp knife
- A small hatchet
- A whetstone or steel for sharpening
- Several feet of rope or nylon cord
- Six-inch rubber bands
- Clean cloths or paper towels
- Sealable storage bags
- A large cooler full of ice or snow
- Disposable gloves for dressing
- Clean drinking water

General Recommendations

- Take care of your harvest as soon as possible, especially during warm weather. When the air temperature is over 40° F, harmful bacteria capable of causing foodborne illness grow quickly.
- Aim to chill the carcass surface to 40° F or lower within 24 hours.
- Wear disposable gloves while handling deer to reduce the risk of exposure to disease.
- If the organs smell offensive or exhibit greenish discharge, black blood or blood clots in the muscle, do not consume meat from this carcass. Discard the carcass properly.
- Use sealable food quality plastic storage bags or buckets for cut meats. Do not use dark-colored trash bags; they may contain toxic resins and are not intended for food use.
- Clean the knife with clean water, pre-moistened wipes, or alcohol swabs frequently or between cuts to avoid dragging bacteria into the meat.

Field Dressing

- Field-dress the carcass immediately after death.
- Remove all visible dirt, feces, hair and bloodshot areas.
- Wipe out the body cavity with paper towels.
- If you wash the cavity with water, dry the area quickly to prevent spoilage.
- Spread the rib cage to aid in air circulation and cool the carcass more quickly.
- If the air temperature is over 40° F, consider packing the carcass with ice or snow sealed in plastic storage bags. Secure the bags in place by tying the cavity shut with rope or cord.
- Place the heart and liver in a food-grade plastic bag if you wish to keep them.



Transporting and Processing Game

- Keep the carcass out of sunlight and allow for adequate air circulation.
- Do not tie the deer across the hood or roof of a car or place it in a car trunk where warmer temperatures promote bacterial growth.
- Use a cooler filled with ice or dry ice to store cut meat.
- In very warm weather, it is important to register and process venison as soon as it is harvested. Venison will spoil if it hangs without refrigeration in warm weather.
- Let the registration station know if you wish to donate your harvest to the “charitable venison program.”



Home Processing

- Hold the carcass at 40° F or less, but avoid freezing the carcass before rigor to avoid toughening the meat.
- During processing, frequently clean your knife between cuts to avoid contaminating the meat.
- Cut damaged meat away from the wound channel.
- Thoroughly wash your knife, hands and cutting boards often with warm, soapy water. Limit sawing through bone, especially in the spine.
- Cut and package the meat into meal-size portions.
- Use heavily waxed paper, freezer wrap, heavy-duty aluminum foil, vacuum bags or plastic freezer bags for meat storage.
- Wrap meat tightly and remove all air from the bag before sealing.
- Use a permanent marker to label packages with contents and dates.



Freezing

- Freezing is helpful to maintain flavor and tenderness and to retain nutritive properties when done properly.
- Space packages in freezer to allow proper air circulation for cooling and freezing.
- Rapid freezing is preferred to keep ice crystal size smaller and minimize drip loss.
- Freezing stops the growth of microorganisms during storage and may damage or kill some organisms.
- Properly wrapped venison will store in the freezer for 9-12 months.

Aging

- Aging can improve tenderness, but must be monitored to ensure proper temperature.
- Age deer only if it has been properly handled, is clean and is not gut shot.
- Leave the skin on the carcass during cold aging to hold down shrinkage and avoid discoloration.
- The proper aging temperature range is between 32° F and 36° F; never higher than 40° F.
- Deer should not be aged any longer than 2 weeks.

Commercial Processing

Many licensed meat plants in Wisconsin will process venison. However, it's best to call before going. A good meat processor will:

- Accept only fresh-appearing venison in food quality containers.
- Store and process venison separately from other meat and foods.
- Include your name, cut of meat and the statement "NOT FOR SALE" on each package.
- Store carcasses in a cold, clean place.
- Hang the carcass rather than throw it on the floor.
- Have a clean processing area free of insects and rodents.
- Keep doors and windows closed.
- Practice safe food handling techniques (clean aprons, no smoking or chewing tobacco while handling food or in the food processing areas).
- Handle your venison in a manner you'd expect for all foods.

Thawing

- Meat thaws more slowly than it freezes, so slow thawing tends to reduce drip loss leading to a moister piece of cooked meat.
- Keep uncooked venison frozen at 0° F or less. Keep thawed venison refrigerated at 40° F or less.
- Thaw uncooked venison in the microwave or refrigerator. Do not leave packages on the countertop to defrost.
- Make sure juices from uncooked venison do not touch other foods, especially those that are ready-to-eat, as this can cause cross-contamination.
- To avoid damaging the quality of your meat, do not refreeze thawed products.

Where can I find more information?

Wisconsin Department of Agriculture,
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608-224-4681
datcp.wi.gov



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